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Margaret Healy

Wearing powerful words and objects: healing prosthetics

‘Fortis imaginatio generat casum: A strong imagination begetteth chance [creates the event]’¹

The writer-philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) was fascinated by the power of the imagination to make things happen. Opening with the above words, his brilliant essay, ‘Of the force of imagination’ (1580), demonstrates a particular concern with the relationship between the imagination and the body in relation to health and well-being issues. Indeed, this leads him to relate the amusing story of his cunning initiative in solving the sensitive problem of a friend’s sexual impotence. Central to Montaigne’s narrative is a prosthetic device stored in his trunk– ‘a peece of golden plate’ engraved with ‘certain celestiaall figures’ [astrological signs] – which, he tells us, is more generally used to cure headaches when it is ‘fitly laid upon the suture of the head’ by a ‘riband ... fastened under the chin’. On this occasion it is put to quite different but highly efficacious use. Montaigne is present at the marriage ceremony of his friend, an ‘Earle of very good place’, to ‘a very faire Lady’ who had previously been courted by a jealous lover. Rumours are rife that the latter’s malignancy will, through ‘sorceries and witchcrafts’, result in the Earl’s phallic incompetency on his wedding night. Our philosopher is notably sceptical about supernatural effects but he anticipates the force of the imagination in relation to the Earl’s (in)ability to perform: ‘It fel out, his mind was so quailed, and his eares so dulled, that by reason of the bond wherewith the trouble of his imagination had tied him, hee could not run on poste’. All was not lost, however, and the Earl was spared ‘spitefull shame’, by Montaigne’s resourceful preparation of a ‘cure’: finding himself unable to perform, the bridegroom should withdraw to pass water in private ‘and using certaine jestures, I had shewed him, speake such words thrice over. And every time hee

spake them he should girt the ribband ...and very carefully place the plate thereto fastned, just upon his kidneys, and the whole figure, in such a posture'. Fortified thus with the golden plate attached to his body, he must conceal the device under a large dressing gown and 'boldly and confidently returne to his charge'.² Predictably, with the help of the talismanic plate and accompanying ritual, mind triumphed over matter in this instance and the Earl was finally able to 'run on poste'.

This witty tale certainly evidences Montaigne's ingenuity in exploiting sixteenth-century superstitious mentality in order to dupe, and simultaneously aid, his friend; but it also opens an intriguing window onto the prosthetic use of 'powerful' objects and signs in relation to health and well-being in former times. Sceptic he might be, but throughout his writing, Montaigne clearly acknowledges the mysterious, unfathomable power of the imagination combined with strong belief, and of story-telling, not only to terrify (his own imagination is revealed as the source of considerable anxiety) but also to calm and heal the body through that which we might now term, 'placebo effect'.³ 'Prosthesis' is from the classical Greek word *πρόσθεσις* meaning 'addition', and this essay explores an ancient practice that persisted through the early modern period (and is still evident today), which manifested itself as the 'addition' to the body of apotropaic objects, symbols and words.⁴ Montaigne's tongue-in-cheek account provides us with a particularly graphic example of this popular practice. Certainly, in the medieval and early modern periods a wide range of material objects bound to the body or kept in close proximity were deemed to have special protective and curative powers. The most obvious might seem to be entities like tiny parts of putative saints' bodies contained in decorative amulets, precious stones, crucifixes, and pilgrimage badges. However, for the majority of people the special objects were likely far more prosaic. But how do we discover more about these when their fragile material traces have likely long since disappeared?

Inquisition records are one source of useful clues. The inventory taken of the strange contents of one relatively well-to-do woman's leather bag in 1320 is particularly illuminating. Beatrice de Planisolles was arrested in the Pamier region of Languedoc, France, suspected of belonging to the Cathar sect whose tenets – though Christian – were heretical in the eyes of the Pope. During her trial she was invited to account for a number of suspicious items: two male umbilical cords, a grain of an unidentified plant wrapped in silk, a seed of rocket, grains of lightly burnt frankincense, several pieces of dried bread and pieces of linen. Beatrice was disarmingly candid about her use of most of the objects. The umbilical cords from her daughter's sons were to protect her from unfavourable law suits. The incense was to cure her daughter's headaches. The herb seed wrapped in silk had been given to her by a pilgrim who told her it could cure 'falling sickness' [epilepsy]. However she kept suspiciously quiet about the rocket and the bread. Rocket was thought to be an aphrodisiac and dried, sacramentally-blessed bread kept close to the body was Cathar protection against a variety of misfortunes. It might have been effective – it seems that Beatrice was not charged and survived this particular inquisition intact.⁵ Given her Cathar beliefs, Beatrice's choice of potent items might not have been representative, but various popular treatises such as *The Book of Secrets of the virtues of herbs, stones and certain beasts* testify to the widespread belief in the apotropaic powers of more 'orthodox' objects such as gemstones and hares' feet. According to this book, a hare's foot bound to the left arm would render the wearer invincible when travelling; indeed, Samuel Pepys's diary testifies to his firm belief in this prophylactic in the seventeenth century.⁶ Further examples are a diamond bound to the left side of the body, which apparently affords protection against madness; while a piece of coral hung around the neck protects a child against evil spirits.⁷ As Louise Bishop's *Words, Stones, & Herbs* highlights, popular medical books such as Gilbertus Anglicus's *Compendium medicinae* (13th

century) commonly reiterated the phrase ‘To three things God gives virtue: to words, to herbs, and to stones’.⁸

The inclusion of ‘words’ in Gilbertus’s list of potent ‘things’ brings me to the focal concern of this essay with the wearing of powerful words – a prosthetic practice closely connected with the conjunction of rhetoric and medicine that informs David Wills’s seminal study, *Prosthesis*.⁹ Frequently prescribed and produced by priests, physicians and other healers, and attached to a body part in the form of word charms (from Latin *carmen* denoting a song, poem or spell); textual amulets (‘amulet’ is from Arabic *hamalet* meaning an object worn on the body); or tattooed directly on the skin; these powerful inscriptions were imagined to target a defective organ or to project a protective shield around the body.¹⁰ As such they functioned as artificial substitutes for an ideal skin – supplements to counter the deficiency of the all too permeable and vulnerable human skin envelope. Indeed, they constituted a material-fantasy armoury of medical, spiritual and social defence. In a way, then – and if the modern urge to see these as retrograde, superstitious practices is resisted – they can be perceived as early tools of civilization (involving craftsmanship, artistry and writing skills) designed to counter the sources of human suffering. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) Freud famously described the first two of these as ‘the superior power of nature’ and ‘the feebleness of our own bodies’ and proposed that in striving to overcome the vulnerability of our bodies in the face of nature we create supplementary tools (including ‘writing’ which ‘was in its origin the voice of an absent person’) thereby ‘removing the limits’ to the functioning of our bodies. He perceived ‘cleanliness’ and particularly ‘order’ as crucial signs of man’s success – ‘the benefits of order are incontestable’. Freud envisaged a ‘civilization’ trajectory in which man, striving to overcome his limitations, would increasingly resemble a ‘prosthetic God’.¹¹ This essay asks questions about the imagination, memory, and healing and attempts to offer a window of understanding onto pre-modern involvement in the on-going

process of extending the limits of self-hood and making the 'feeble' body comprehensible through the prosthetic use of words, symbols and narrative.

Medicine has a particularly close relationship with rhetoric and order. As anthropology has established, the questions people around the globe ask themselves and their healers when they are sick are: Why me? Why now? Am I myself to blame? Am I a victim of attack from outside?¹² Further, if we are prepared to look beyond bio-medicine and think more holistically, it is possible to acknowledge the deep relevance of the anthropologist Meyer Fortes's proposition that any system of medicine should be viewed as 'an institutional apparatus of defence against the incursion of pain' and 'the ever-looming threat of annihilation that is the human lot'.¹³ On the basis of these observations it can be concluded that every culture's system of medicine is required to meet two ends: first, to provide convincing explanations of bodily misfortune; and secondly, to attempt to control the underlying processes – to re-establish order. As Claude Levi-Strauss concluded in *Myth and Meaning*:

If we look at all the intellectual undertakings of mankind, as far as they have been recorded all over the world, the common denominator is always to introduce some kind of order ... while, of course, myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment ... it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe.¹⁴

'Illusion' can serve a positive function then. In pre-modern cultures orthodox medicine was, in fact, illusory myth: the humoral Hippocratic-Galenic model of the body which reigned supreme in the West for many centuries was, in reality, a highly plausible story of how the body functioned (as a seething sac of fluids called humours), along with a range of painful 'cures' – purging, vomiting, bleeding, aimed at re-balancing the body's four humours –

which we now know, with the benefit of hindsight, probably did patients far more harm than good. Never-the-less, the humoral myth did function to impose some sort of authoritative narrative order on terrifying bodily chaos, potentially reducing anxiety.¹⁵ This essay proposes, however, that popular forms of medicine such as prosthetic charms and amulets, which remain relatively neglected by medical historians, were likely just as – if not more – efficacious. Their capacity to harm was certainly negligible compared to dangerous humoral ‘cures’ and the potential beneficial effects of word therapy are particularly worthy of serious consideration in the light of current research into placebo medicine and the relation between memory, stories, sensory stimulation and healing.¹⁶ Indeed, as I argue here, it is possible to view textual amulet ‘supplements’ to the body as narrative prosthesis – even as pre-cursors to the novel in their ability to ‘prostheticize’.¹⁷

In the medieval and early modern era word amulets might be very simple, containing only a few words, or elaborate and extensive (Henry VIII owned an illuminated amulet roll 441 cm long) involving a variety of mystical texts construed as powerful: the Gospels, legendary narratives about Jesus’s healing ‘letters’ sent to the favoured, stories of martyrs, word charms against a variety of ailments, apocrypha, images of crosses and Christ’s wounds frequently combined with more occult symbolism and folk-belief formulae. David Elton Gay has convincingly argued that this should not be understood as remnants of superstition existing in tension with Christian belief; rather, folk belief ‘should be imagined as Christian, because the believers perceive it to be so, even though part of what they believe is not part of the approved liturgy and theology of the official churches’.¹⁸ Amulets frequently contained instructions and rules associated with their use. In the twelfth century the famous German nun and physician Hildegard of Bingen facilitated long-distance cures using word charms. Her dream visions provided her with specific healing texts that she would record on wax tablets; these were later copied by a scribe and sent as a letter with instructions to her often

well-to-do patients who included popes and kings. They usually involved incantation of her words over the patient. The disease was often addressed directly, as in this cure for a fever recorded in her textbook *Physica*:

For a fever you take a ripe beech nut, mix it in spring water and say ‘through the holy girdle of the holy incarnation by which god became man, grow weak, you fever and you feverish conditions, and weaken your cold ness and heat in this person’. Then give the person the water to drink.¹⁹

Sometimes word amulets instruct recipients to wash the words in water to be drunk or to inscribe them on food such as an apple or cheese and subsequently eaten – the words had literally to be consumed.

Hildegard frequently ordered that her amulet-letters should be placed on the affected body part, but the commonest way to wear more general-use amulets was suspended from the neck by a thong or necklace. Textual amulets were folded or rolled up and placed in a suspension capsule, jewel, or leather or fabric sack. Hung in this way their protective power was imagined to encircle the body providing a prosthetic defence field to ward off a range of evils including devils and diseases. The fact that the text would be close to, or cover the heart was thought to be particularly efficacious—the heart was the seat of the sensitive soul. Worn underneath chain mail they may also have provided a second line of defence against crossbow bolts—there is evidence of this from the third crusade circa 1190 during which textual amulets were especially prepared for the crusaders.²⁰ Indeed, the breast pocket on clothing might have developed in order to facilitate the wearing of words over the heart, especially in battle. During the English civil wars the merchant Ambrose Barnes observed that soldiers in the New Model Army of Parliament carried small bibles in their pockets affording both divine and material protection: ‘many had their lives saved, by bullets hitting

upon little pocket-bibles they carried about'.²¹ Amulets could also be suspended from belts in purses, and wrapped in pieces of cloth and tucked into sleeves, pockets or other garment openings. They could even be incorporated into garments: for example, the entire bodice of a black silk gown (from 1630-35) is stiffened with pages from a sixteenth-century bible.²²

Amulets were also bound to thighs and arms and they could be attached to a girdle, encircling a woman's girth and suspended down her abdomen during labour (the use of a birth girdle was a particularly popular practice).²³ Ancient myth and history bear witness to some particularly intriguing uses of texts for general protection and specific complaints. In the legend of the Golden Fleece, Medea prepares Jason for battle by providing him with a textual amulet. The second century Roman Physician Quintus Serenus Sammonicus advised treating *quartan ague* (recurring malaria) by placing behind a patient's head a papyrus roll of the fourth book of Homer's *Iliad*; while to dispel another type of fever he advised wearing a papyrus amulet around the neck bearing certain particularly potent letters – ABRACADABRA – arranged in an inverted triangle.²⁴ The latter was likely Jewish in origin deriving from the Hebrew for 'Name of the blessed'. Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year* testifies to the persistent use of the ABRACADABRA inverted triangle to ward off sickness in the early eighteenth century.²⁵

We know that there were professional manufacturers of word amulets and religious orders, physicians and scholars participated in their production and use. By the sixteenth century mass-produced broadside amulets could even be purchased from pedlars. Words might be inscribed on wooden blocks and small metal sheets called *lamellae* especially for medical use on the body, or written on fabric, parchment or, later, paper. The use of Virgin parchment was imagined to increase the efficacy of the verbal texts: this referred to uterine parchment made from the tough membrane of the amniotic sac or from the skin of the aborted foetus of a kid or lamb.²⁶ Words and other signs could also be inscribed on rings and

jewellery or tattooed directly onto the body. Jennifer Allen Rosecrans has described how the early modern physician Simon Forman painted astrological signs on his arm and breast in indelible ink, hoping thereby to harness celestial powers.²⁷ There is evidence of pilgrims to shrines in Jerusalem and Italy in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries returning brandishing Christian tattoos: for example, the traveller George Sandys recorded how, at Jerusalem, ‘they use to mark the arms of Pilgrims, with the names of Jesus, Maria, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Jerusalem Crosse, and sundry other characters’; and Thomas Coryat had a Jerusalem cross inscribed on his left wrist and a cross, three nails and *Via, Veritas, Vita* on his right.²⁸ It seems that powerful words and symbols could be worn simply and unobtrusively, or displayed – in the manner of Coryat’s tattoos – as badges of cultural belonging and belief. As the sociologist Marcel Mauss has described, it is through the body and the ways in which it is ‘deployed, displayed and modified, that socially appropriate self-understandings are formed and reproduced’.²⁹ The boundaries of the body are particularly significant in this respect and, according to the theorist of body marks in the modern context Michael M. J. Fischer the more we ‘tinker’ with them, the more the nature of the ‘bestial’ and ‘divine’ are ‘redefined’.³⁰ Indeed, body modification practices such as tattooing and the wearing of words and other signs can be seen, too, as forms of self-intervention and self-control over bodies which are often felt to be at the mercy of ‘powers and forces over which the modifiers may otherwise feel they have little control’.³¹ Embellishments to skin surfaces can manifest the desire to be ‘protected, sealed off, defended from external threats, i.e. armoured’.³²

At this stage more detailed amplification of the nature and character of the words, texts and symbols deployed in the medieval and early modern context is requisite: which words were construed as especially powerful and why? Canterbury Cathedral library contains the earliest extant multipurpose textual amulet (probably mid-thirteenth century) and,

thankfully, this worn and dirty artefact is a treasure trove of information about seminal texts and their formatting for apotropaic use (**Figures 1 and 2**). It is written in Latin in brownish ink and appears to have been produced by one scribe. The archivist Don C. Skemer has provided a particularly knowledgeable account of its appearance and wealth of contents. The parchment sheet measuring 51.2 by 42.7 cm is ruled in lead point into eight columns; it has seven vertical folds and three horizontal creases – which, as Skemer points out, are sacred numbers – and when fully folded forms a portable rectangle 12.8 by 5.3 cm; thus it could have fitted readily into a pouch hung around the neck (despite its thirty-two thicknesses of parchment when folded). It is densely covered in ‘an almost seamless web of more than fifty brief magical or prayer-like texts’; this density of words might have been imagined to form a ‘web-like shield to ward off demons’.³³

The amulet contains instructions about rituals which should accompany its use: the reader is twice told to chant powerful names and to say the *Pater Noster* three times and is reminded eight times about the value of wearing powerful words and symbols. The close attention to number and counting is significant. As Thomas Lentes has demonstrated, ‘the counting of piety’ reached a high point in the Middle Ages: ‘Strict attention was paid to the observation of the exact figure’ of prayers and other rituals; indeed, ‘counting appeared an essential component of the practice of piety’ helping to order both body and soul.³⁴ Valerie Allen has argued, too, that counting piety is ‘a kind of self-management, and self-management is a deeply affective practice’; affective engagement was thus undoubtedly heightened by these enumeration rituals.³⁵

Short texts throughout the amulet inform the user of the legendary personages who experienced divine healing and protection through heavenly letters, magical characters, and Solomonic seals and figures (the legendary pentagram-shaped signet ring of Solomon with the power to repel demons). Such magical-religious symbols can be seen on the upper

horizontal band of the amulet; the scribe clearly had no qualms about mixing elements of folk tradition and natural magic with more orthodox Christian signs—there are Greek, Latin and Tau crosses, together with divine names and words like *alpha* and *omega*. The user is instructed that anyone who looks at them, or carries them on a particular day will enjoy protection. Extending down from the arm of the Celtic cross on the upper quadrant is a lozenge shaped figure—the healing image of the Side Wound of Christ – which contains the magical word ABRACALABRA that was believed to drive out demons. By constantly looking at these images, and meditating upon them, viewers could imprint them in memory and enhance their powers.³⁶ By gazing on the twenty seals on the reverse of the parchment, the texts around the perimeter declare, the viewer can gain protection that day against fire, storm, flood and sudden death. The web of closely fitting texts on the amulet includes scriptural quotations, especially from the Gospel of John; the Seven Last Words (Matthew 27: 46); prayers; litanies of the saints; blood-staunching charms and a version of the Heavenly Letter.

Words used by Christ were ascribed especial potency and thus an apocryphal Heavenly Letter thought to have been written by him to King Abgar V of Edessa, Southern Turkey, was a valuable and highly popular choice of text for word amulets. The earliest extant description of this Heavenly Letter is found in the *historia ecclesiastica* of the church historian Eusebius d. 340 who claimed that he read the original letters from Agbar to Christ and Christ's reply in the public archives at Edessa and translated them from Syriac into Greek. According to this account king Agbar wrote to Christ asking for help because of Christ's reputation for effecting miraculous cures with words and touch. Christ blessed Agbar for believing in him and promised to send one of the disciples on a mission to heal the ailing toparch and protect the city of Edessa against its enemies. Christ's letter reputedly cured Agbar of grave illness, assisted him in repelling Persian invasion and led him to convert his

kingdom to Christianity.³⁷ Whoever carried or wore the Heavenly Letter on their own body would enjoy similar benefits. The Heavenly Letter spread geographically to all corners of the medieval West and was eventually transported to the New World. The Sunday Epistle—another healing letter said to have been written by Christ—was also widely incorporated into textual amulets. There is reference in the Canterbury amulet, too, to the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus: Christians who were miraculously protected as they slept in a cave near Ephesus; this text placed under a person's head could induce sleep.³⁸

The amulet also contains specific charms to staunch bleeding and many litanies of divine names in Greek and Hebrew; for example, *adonay*, *athanatos*, *theos*, *pantheon*, *tetragrammaton* continuing for eighty names: repetition and sheer volume of numbers appear to enhance the power of the text. Many seem to have shared Origen's belief that Hebrew was the primal language and that divine names were more powerful in the original Hebrew, especially when spoken.³⁹ The provenance on the multi-purpose Canterbury amulet is unclear but since sections of the text require the chanting of seven masses, daily fasting, and reading the entire Psalter in order to maximise the efficacy of its powerful words, Skemer concludes that early clerical use was likely: it might have been worn by a priest for personal protection and simultaneously functioned as a compendium of 'cures' for use in the care for parishioners. There is evidence, too, of lay use: it bears endorsements in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century hands relating to Kentish landowning families; we can speculate that it might have been used by generations of families as both textual amulet to cure the family's ills and as a portable book of texts for copying out and use by household, neighbours and friends.⁴⁰

The provenance of a beautifully decorated late fifteenth-century textual amulet roll held in Ushaw College Durham (MS29) is clearer and indicates that such word and image therapy penetrated across all social classes—even monarchy. This amulet roll contains a

hand-written annotation by Prince Henry (later Henry VIII of England) indicating that he gave the roll to his trusted servant William Thomas from whom he requested prayers in return for this gift. The roll also contains the heraldic coat of arms of a bishop who likely commissioned and presented the amulet to the young prince. The English text is accompanied by several well-executed devotional images: a painted crucifixion miniature showing Christ's bloody wounds dominates but beneath the cross's arms are two angels displaying unfurled roll amulets. The first of these painted rolls promises general protection, material prosperity and safe childbirth to those who wear the text on their bodies; the second contains a Latin prayer to St Cyricus and St Julitta whose names were associated with assistance in childbirth. A roll such as this might well have been conceived as a protective devotional amulet to be draped down the belly of Henry's future consort in labour as a 'birth girdle'. It also contains images of the side wound of Christ, of the three nails piercing his hands and the sacred heart. The surrounding text promises wearers of the images general protection if they also recite the *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria* and *Credo* five times a day; it concludes with a series of prayers to popular saints.⁴¹ Gazing, wearing, praying and counting were the mechanisms whereby the powers of the devotional- medicinal roll could be maximised; again, ritual enactment aimed at maximising affective engagement is construed as essential.

The inclusion of blood-staunching texts in the Canterbury Cathedral multi-purpose amulet is unsurprising – they were the commonest form of narrative word charm and they have a long legacy. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus sustains a leg 'gash' which is bound by Autolycus's sons while they chant a 'rune' over him to staunch 'the dark flow of blood'. (*Odyssey* 19: 457-59).⁴² About 300 surviving charms in English from the period from 1370 to 1540 are against bleeding and the apocryphal *Flum Jordan* motif is particularly widespread. From his study of the transmission of charms in English, T. M. Smallwood concludes that textual charms generally have a 'sequence of thought, a rationale, usually describing an event

or some supposed truth and making this the grounds for a claim to divine help or protection ...what defines them is a motif, a “narrative” ... which forms the introduction to an appeal for a specific, related favour’.⁴³ They were used by all sectors of society and they frequently employ repetition, alliteration and rhyme (partly as aids to memory but the sound of the incantation may also have enhanced its efficacy), such as this *Flum Jordan* charm beginning, ‘Jesu that was in Bedlem born/ and baptised was in Flum Jordane/ and stynted the water upon the ston/ stent the blod of this man’.⁴⁴ In the fifteenth century, the physician Thomas Fayreford recorded his use of the *Flum Jordan* motif (in Latin) for stopping nosebleeds:

Lord, my God, may you be a helper to your servant N[ame the name]. Just as you held back the River Jordan (flumen Jordanis) when Christ was baptized, so may you restrain the veins full of the blood of your servant N[ame the name].⁴⁵

According with Smallwood, the charm specialist Lea Olsan suggests that the semantic motif of the stayed flow of the Jordon River ‘brings to the patient the fulfilled possibility for his own particular cure’.⁴⁶ This certainly seems plausible: committed to memory, the texts of charms function to collapse together sacred past, present predicament and future expectation.

Rituals, incantation and the use of sacred numbers and words in Greek, Latin and Hebrew appear to have intensified the imagined power of charms to protect and cure. Smallwood suggests that, according to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century church records, ‘cunning’ men and women were frequently prosecuted for employing charms; however, their use was widespread: there is considerable evidence from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries of charm copies being ‘carried about the person, on paper or cloth’. Indeed, as recently as 1982 when an elderly woman died in Pennsylvania, the following charm was discovered on a loose sheet among her papers: ‘ When water was wood/ Before Noah’s flood/ Our Saviour stood, yes, firmly stood/ To stop the flow of human blood/ of [name]’.⁴⁷

Astonishingly, although charms are not part of the approved theology of the official churches, no Christian culture from late antiquity on, has lacked an incantation corpus to be deployed in the ‘on-going battle against the demonic’.⁴⁸ In fact the good-evil dualism of Christianity necessitates belief in penetrative ‘evil’ forces be they diseases or devils. Although it might be anticipated the Reformation with its suppression of the cult of saints and icons would have put paid to charm and amulet culture this was not the case. The clergyman and physician Richard Napier regularly supplied his patients with amulets (between 1597 and 1634);⁴⁹ and even the avidly Protestant Earl of Gowrie – political opponent of James VI of Scotland – was found to be wearing a protective charm against bleeding around his neck on his deathbed.⁵⁰ Indeed the durability of the British charm tradition has led historian Owen Davies to hypothesise that the Protestant emphasis on the importance of the written word led to a ‘concomitantly greater popular emphasis on the power of literacy and literary forms’ in early modern folk culture.⁵¹

The inclusion of passages from the Gospel of John in the Canterbury amulet is to be expected since the scriptural quotations most frequently found in textual amulets are from the apotropaic opening verses of the Gospel of John (1: 1-14). In fact, there is evidence of the widespread practice of attaching to the body the whole Gospel of John for the treatment of many diseases including fever and headaches: St Augustine railed against this vexing popular tradition. Ironically, although St Cuthbert himself condemned the use of amuletic texts as idolatrous and superstitious, after his death his small codex of the Gospel of John was kept in a leather case bearing a silk cord enabling it to worn hung from the neck by distinguished visitors to Durham Cathedral. This sacred relic with curative powers became known as the Stonyhurst Gospel.⁵² But what was so efficacious about the Gospel of John? It is undoubtedly significant that the first fourteen verses are all about the power of words, especially to heal: it famously opens, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word

was God'; 'the words that I speak unto you, they are the spirit, and they are life' (6.63). As S. J. Tambiah has observed, 'The Greek doctrine of *logos* postulated that the soul or essence of things resided in their names' and this may account, too, for the frequency of sequences of divine names in amulets.⁵³ The Gospel proceeds to tell of Christ's activities as a miracle-worker: this is the Gospel in which Christ 'raiseth Lazarus', heals a blind man and multiplies barley loaves and fish. Absolute belief in the power of the Word to perform miracles is presented by the Gospel of John as a prerequisite for would-be healers as well as sufferers: 'He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also' (14:12); 'If a man love me, he will keep my words' (14:23); 'He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings' (14:24).⁵⁴ It seems that the Word and words are fundamental to successful cures.

In the light of this Gospel and the other texts examined here, how were amulets imagined to work? What was the anticipated effect of gazing at their images and words, reciting God's words and wearing them, and of reading, and/or hearing, and thus remembering stories of Christ's and his Apostles' and Saints' miraculous successes? As is now well understood, texts were read and used differently in the past: for example, the Renaissance scholar Gabriel Harvey annotated one of his books with the prompt that it was 'perpetually to be meditated, practiced, and incorporated into [his] boddy, & sowle greedily devowrid & rawly concoctid' in order to facilitate 'sounde and deepe imprinting as well in ye memory, as in the understanding' (Preface xv).⁵⁵ The images which accompanied words in devotional texts like amulets enhanced memory practices; and rituals such as making the sign of the cross and repeating certain prayers a number of times, fostered memory too. Once the memory 'pictures' were firmly fixed in the mind through 'incessant, essential exchanges' they must be closely 'ruminated' (meditated upon) in the 'stomach of the mind' with the 'inner eye' of understanding.⁵⁶ In this two-way traffic between inner and outer, God's word and his divinity could literally be incorporated into the body. In the

Renaissance some even envisaged that they could be ‘deified’ by such a process— become one with Christ by ingesting His Word. In a very affective way, then, early modern people imagined that through wearing and using these prosthetic devices they could increase their likeness to, and closeness to God.⁵⁷

As Alison Landsberg observes in *Prosthetic Memory*, such memory practices had the effect of ‘flattening time’ and making the individual ‘own or feel’ connected with the event and actors increasing the likelihood of an experiential relationship and ‘felt’ or affective identification with Christ’s and/or his followers’ sufferings and healings.⁵⁸ Worn on the boundary of the body, the Christian amulet was thus a prosthetic involved in a particularly complex network of exchange among outer, inner, body, soul and divine cosmos. Wills describes the process of ‘selection and retention, disjunction and replacement’ involved in artificial memory practices as that which ‘defines the ... prosthetic’; building on this, Landsberg advances the compelling argument that ‘Memory remains a sensuous phenomenon experienced by the body, and it continues to derive much of its power through affect’.⁵⁹

Landsberg’s thesis, which deals centrally with the modern context, serves to remind us that memory, associated with sensory experience and affective value can have powerful, transformative effects. Staying with textual amulets and memory in the pre-modern context, it is undoubtedly the case that their sensory remit would have been heightened by the types of ritual performances and attention to number and counting so frequently demanded by the instructions written into amulets, as well as by the sounds of the words themselves. The common lists of divine names in Hebrew, Greek and Latin have their own mysterious music when voiced: *Gabriel, Michael, Uriel, Adonai, Emmanuel, Messias* (Hebrew); *Hagios, On, Sother, Theos* (Greek); *Deus, Dominus* (Latin). The Old English alliterative verse of Anglo-Saxon charms, with its ‘evocative imagery and dramatization of thought’, could be particularly resonant, as in this charm against an undefined sharp pain translated by

Smallwood: ‘Loud they were, lo loud, when they rode over the mound,/ They were fierce when they rode over the land./ Shield yourself now that you may survive their illwill./ Out little spear, if you are in here!’.⁶⁰

Indeed, this brings to mind the account in Wills’s *Prosthesis* of the Latin line from Virgil’s *Aeneid* incanted by his father during excruciating bursts of phantom-limb pain – *quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum* – about ‘four-hooved horses galloping across a dusty plain’ (Book 8, line 596); Wills describes this as ‘a discourse whose rhythms could have an amputee articulate his pain’.⁶¹ The rhythmical ‘articulation’ facilitated by memory appears to have exerted a therapeutic effect in easing excruciating pain and we might assume that the Anglo-Saxon verse functioned in a similar manner. The scholar David Frankfurter hypothesizes that when one articulates charm words, ‘the words uttered draw power into the world and towards (or against) an object in the world’ – the release of breath through this ‘speech act’ is effectively taking positive action against an ‘evil’ such as pain.⁶² The anthropologists Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman take this further arguing that when words are performed – as in healing rituals still used extensively around the world today – they have illocutionary force, they do something in the world: ‘the power of the performance is a heightened intensity of communication, an enhancement of experience’. They link this with an increased capacity of the body to ease suffering and heal itself through the stimulation of endorphin production (morphine-like substances) and other endogenous chemicals, concluding with these pressing questions: ‘Is the way to health through the senses? Are people simultaneously moved artistically, psychologically and physiologically?’⁶³

This prompts some final reflections on the role of stories in helping human beings to cope with illness and suffering. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder remind us:

The very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world ... the language of a tale seeks to comprehend that which has stepped out of line ... stories compensate A narrative issues to resolve or correct – to “prostheticize” in David Wills’s sense of the term’.⁶⁴

Narrative prosthesis is certainly called into play in traumatic illness events when the sufferer seeks to understand his predicament: ‘Why me?’ Why now? How? In *The Novel Cure*, the practitioners of bibliotherapy Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin propose that ‘Sometimes it’s the story that charms; sometimes it’s the rhythm of the prose that works on the psyche, stilling or stimulating. Sometimes it’s an idea or an attitude suggested by a character in a similar quandary or jam’.⁶⁵ These observations seem equally relevant to pre-modern textual amulets. Their word therapy gave the afflicted a language and a means through which to express their lack of comprehension and to supplement the void with fictive texts featuring ‘mythical beings and supernatural actors’, providing a way of ‘understanding his or her life situation’; importantly, they could impose some sort of narrative order on chaotic life experience.⁶⁶ In this functional sense then – in their ability to extend the limits of selfhood and to ‘prostheticize’ – textual amulets can be apprehended as precursors to the novel. They also offered the close protective embrace of Christ and connectedness with the Christian community and, crucially, they gave hope. Certainly, they were an imaginative and harmless response to human suffering in a context where placebo healing was the mainstay of medicine and orthodox humoral treatments were unpleasant and life-threatening.

In fact, it is fair to speculate that in pre-modern times, prosthetic amulets and word therapy were among the most effective tools in the medicine chest. Throughout his essays, Montaigne is notably scathing about the ‘arte’ of the university-trained, Galenic physician: ‘the most ignorant and bungling horse-leach is fitter for a man that hath confidence in him, than the skilfullest and learnedst physition.’⁶⁷ The great English advocate of scientific

method, Sir Francis Bacon, concurred: ‘empirics and old women are more happy many times in their cures than learned physicians’.⁶⁸ Both men appear to have shared the perception that ‘believing strongly’ is a potent medicine that can have positive, transforming effects: ‘If a *Man* carries a *Planets Seal*, or a *Ring*, or some *Part* of a *Beast*, believing strongly.... &c. it may make him more *Active*, and *Industrious*; and again, more *Confident* and *Persisting*, than otherwise he would be’.⁶⁹ Inhabiting a pre-Cartesian intellectual world, these early modern philosophers were certainly happy to acknowledge the considerable power of the mind to heal the body; as Montaigne concluded in ‘Of the force of imagination’, ‘all this may be referred to the narrow suture of the Spirit [soul] and the Body ... imagination doth sometimes worke’.⁷⁰ Indeed, with the surge of interest in placebo effects and the emergence of subjects like medical humanities and bibliotherapy in twenty-first century culture, it seems that we may at last be reconnecting with our embodied selves and recognising the important role of the mind and emotions, and thus of the arts, in healing – the power of the imagination *does* sometimes work.

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¹ Michel de Montaigne, ‘Of the force of imagination’, trans. John Florio (1603), in *Essays* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1910), 3 vols, Vol. 1, Ch. XX, p. 92. All citations are to this edition.

² Montaigne, ‘Of the force of imagination’, pp. 96, 95, 96, 97.

³ The past two decades have seen a notable rise of research into placebo effects and their potential for use in modern medicine. See Anne Arrington (ed.), *The Placebo Effect* (1997; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000); Daniel Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine and the ‘Placebo Effect’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Ted J. Kaptchuk and Franklin G. Miller, ‘Placebo Effects in Medicine’, *New England Journal of Medicine* (July 2015), pp. 373-9.

⁴ See John Rees Lewes, University of Sussex Thesis 54918, *Amulets: the psychology of magical thought in a contemporary context*, 2000.

⁵ The episode is recounted in Rene Weis, *The Yellow Cross: the story of the last Cathars’ rebellion against the inquisition 1290-1329* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), pp. 6-8.

⁶ Michael R. Best and Frank H. Brightman (eds), *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus: of the virtues of herbs, stones and certain beasts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 54. On Pepys see Margaret Healy, ‘Popular Medicine’, in Andrew Hadfield, Matthew Dimmock, Abigail Shinn (eds) *Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 311.

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- ⁷ Magnus, *Book of Secrets*, p. 31.
- ⁸ Louise M. Bishop, *Words, Stones, & Herbs: the healing word in medieval and early modern England* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press), see especially pp. 44-76.
- ⁹ David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 219.
- ¹⁰ For definitions see, Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: textual amulets in the Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press), pp. 6-11.
- ¹¹ James Strachey (ed.), *Sigmund Freud: Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), pp. 23, 28, 30, 29.
- ¹² Meyer Fortes, 'Foreword', in J. B. Loudon (ed.), *Social Anthropology and Medicine* (London: Academic Press, 1979), p. xix; and Margaret Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 9.
- ¹³ Meyer Fortes, 'Foreword', pp. xix-xx.
- ¹⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 12-13.
- ¹⁵ See Healy, *Fictions of Disease*, pp. 19-23.
- ¹⁶ Overviews of such research can be found in Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine and the 'Placebo Effect'*; and Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman (eds), *The Performance of Healing* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- ¹⁷ See below, p. -- .
- ¹⁸ David Elton Gay, 'On the Christianity of Incantations', in Jonathan Roper (ed.), *Charms and Charming in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p.43.
- ¹⁹ For discussion of Hildegard's medicine and citation from *Physica* see, Debra L. Stoudt, 'Medieval German Women and the Power of Healing' in Lilian R. Furst (ed.), *Women Healers and Physicians: Climbing a Long Hill* (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky, 1997), pp. 13-42, 23- 4.
- ²⁰ Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 29.
- ²¹ Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 161.
- ²² This is currently in the Hupsch Collection, Hessischen Landesmuseums, Darmstadt.
- ²³ Joseph J. Gwara and Mary Morse, 'A Birth Girdle Printed by Wynkyn de Worde', *The Library* 13:1 (2012), pp. 33-62.
- ²⁴ Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 148, 25
- ²⁵ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London, 1722), p.40.
- ²⁶ On the production and use of amulets see Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 125-69.
- ²⁷ Jennifer Allen Rosecrans, 'Wearing the Universe: Symbolic Markings in Early Modern England', in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), pp. 46-60, especially pp. 46-7.
- ²⁸ Juliet Fleming, 'The Renaissance Tattoo', in *Written on the Body*, pp. 61-82, p. 79.
- ²⁹ Discussed in Alfred Gell, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (1993; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 3.
- ³⁰ Michael M. J. Fischer, 'Body Marks (Bestial/ Divine/ Natural)' in Ivan Crozier (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age*, vol 6 (2010; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 165-200, p. 182.
- ³¹ Anna Cole and Anna Haebich, 'Remarkable Bodies' in *The Human Body in the Modern Age*, pp. 147-164, p. 162.
- ³² Gell, *Wrapping in Images*, pp. 30, 38.
- ³³ Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 199-214, especially pp. 109, 202.
- ³⁴ Thomas Lentes, 'Counting Piety in the Late Middle Ages', in Bernhard Jussen (ed.), *Ordering Medieval Society: perspectives on intellectual and practical modes of shaping social relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 55-91; p. 60, p. 55.
- ³⁵ I am indebted to Valerie Allen for these important insights into the medieval practice of 'counting piety' and her generous sharing of the unpublished text of her paper 'Protective Measures: some late medieval charms' delivered at Kalamazoo, May 2014.
- ³⁶ Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 203, 205.
- ³⁷ Curt F. Buhler, 'Prayers and Charms in Certain Middle English Scrolls', *Speculum*, 39 (1964), pp. 270-78.
- ³⁸ Skemer, *Binding Words*, 207.
- ³⁹ Skemer, *Binding Words*, 113.

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- ⁴⁰ Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 210-12.
- ⁴¹ Henry VIII's amulet is discussed in Skemer, *Binding Words*, 266-7.
- ⁴² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Indiana: Anchor Books, 1963), Ch.19, ll.454-57.
- ⁴³ T. M. Smallwood, 'The Transmission of Charms in English', in Jonathan Roper (ed.), *Charms and Charming in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 11-31, p. 15, p. 11.
- ⁴⁴ Cited in Smallwood, 'Transmission', p. 18.
- ⁴⁵ Translated from Latin by Lea T. Olsan, 'Charms in Medieval Memory' in Roper, *Charming*, p.75.
- ⁴⁶ Olsan, 'Charms', p.78.
- ⁴⁷ Smallwood, 'Transmission', pp. 21, 22.
- ⁴⁸ See Gay, 'Christianity', pp. 34-5, 43.
- ⁴⁹ See Michael Macdonald, *Mystical Bedlam: madness, anxiety, and healing in seventeenth-century England* (1981; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 24, 31, 109.
- ⁵⁰ See Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 134.
- ⁵¹ Owen Davies, 'French Charmers and their Healing Charms', in Roper, *Charming*, pp. 91-112, p. 109.
- ⁵² See Frank Kermode, 'John', in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 441-5; and Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 87, 50-2.
- ⁵³ S. J. Tambiah, 'The Magical Power of Words', in *Man: the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 3: 2 (1968), pp. 182-4.
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- ⁵⁵ Cited in Bill Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), Preface xv.
- ⁵⁶ Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (eds), *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, pp. 21-3 citing St Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.14.21.
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- ⁵⁸ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 5-6.
- ⁵⁹ Wills, *Prosthesis*, p. 230; Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p.8.
- ⁶⁰ Cited in Smallwood, 'Transmission', p. 13.
- ⁶¹ Wills, *Prosthesis*, pp. 3-9.
- ⁶² David Frankfurter, 'Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells' in Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (eds), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. 457-76, p. 457.
- ⁶³ Laderman and Roseman, *The Performance of Healing*, pp. 2, 7-8, 4.
- ⁶⁴ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, 'Narrative Prosthesis', in Lennard J. Davies (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 222-35, p. 227.
- ⁶⁵ Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Novel Cure: An A-Z of Literary Remedies* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2013), p.2.
- ⁶⁶ Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, 'Charms as a means of Coping', in Jonathan Roper (ed.), *Charms, Charmers and Charming: International Research on Verbal Magic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 62-70, p. 66.
- ⁶⁷ Michel de Montaigne, 'Of the resemblance between children and fathers', in Florio (trans.) *Essays*, Vol. 2, p. 504.
- ⁶⁸ Francis Bacon, *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623), in James Spedding, Robert Ellis and Douglas Heath (eds), *The Works of Francis Bacon* (London, 1858), 15 vols., Vol. 4, p. 388.
- ⁶⁹ Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum* (London, 1626), p. 902.
- ⁷⁰ Montaigne, 'Of the force of imagination', p. 101.